

# Indiana House of Representatives

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## News and Information

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### **REP. BOB BISCHOFF'S STATEHOUSE REPORT**

INDIANAPOLIS – Lawmakers have given final approval to the first major piece of legislation to emerge from the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly, amid growing concerns that many bills advancing through the process will reduce citizen involvement in government.

I supported House Enrolled Act 1003, which speeds up the implementation of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), the entity that will be charged with leading our state's efforts at job creation and retention. I am in favor of any effort to build on the benefits that we are beginning to see through the Energize Indiana program that passed in a strong bipartisan fashion in 2003. Bringing good-paying jobs to Hoosiers will always be one of my priorities.

I also am glad that we were able to change the bill substantially to ensure that members of the IEDC's board are held accountable under state ethics guidelines and the group will have to comply with the Open Door Law and the Open Records Act.

However, House Enrolled Act 1003 places the state's economic development efforts in the hands of a board controlled solely by the governor. These provisions continue a disturbing trend I have seen in a number of bills advocated by the current administration.

Should the governor be able to have sole control over so many things that impact the lives of local residents? It is a question that seems to apply to several other bills that are working through the legislative process.

House Bill 1002 would create the post of inspector general, a person selected by the governor who would have the power to file and prosecute criminal charges in any county in the state. I have concerns about the inspector general having greater authority than county prosecutors, who are selected by the voters in each county.

House Bill 1137 would create a "state information technology chief" appointed by the governor to oversee a variety of telecommunications services that have been handled in the past by a coalition that includes representatives from libraries, public schools and universities. These services have included access to such things as distance learning courses for public schools and allowing specialized courses like advanced math or foreign languages to be taught at several schools by one teacher with two-way video. HB 1137 gives one person the power to decide which schools have access to these advanced services, how much they will pay for them, or whether the services will be offered at all.

I have talked before about House Bill 1188, which would have given the governor the power to drastically reduce citizen involvement in government by eliminating over 300 state boards and commissions that help oversee everything from education to health care to protecting children to helping older Hoosiers. The House Government and Regulatory Reform Committee has softened this proposal by ensuring there will be a legislative review before any advisory groups are eliminated.

House Bill 1719 attempts to place the state Bureau of Motor Vehicles under private control, which would allow license branches to be closed without any chance for public input. Some of you may remember that license branches were once operated under a political patronage system, with profits going to the political party of the governor. I have concerns

that HB 1719 could return us to that system of 20 years ago.

House Bill 1703 would give the governor the ability to select the judges who serve in Marion County, rather than the voters. Currently, 91 counties have the right to elect judges based on their qualifications.

It is easy to understand the interest in reducing the size of government in order to make it more efficient and responsible. All lawmakers share that goal.

These bills appear to be a series of attempts to place an increasing amount of authority in the hands of the executive branch and weaken the balance of power offered by the legislative and judicial branches of government. I am particularly worried that these measures will drastically reduce the opportunities for the citizens of Indiana to take an active role in determining the policies that benefit all Hoosiers.

We are entering the final two weeks for House bills to clear committees in our chamber. In the days to come, we expect to see a proposed biennial state budget come out of the House Ways and Means Committee.

The chairman of that group, State Rep. Jeff Espich (R-Uniondale), promised this week the budget would contain more funding for our schools. This is heartening news for those of us who have seen a number of distressing signs that schools are being forced into a financial crisis that could force teachers to be laid off, programs to be eliminated and class sizes to grow substantially.

House Democrats intend to see that Rep. Espich lives up to his promise on the budget. It will be interesting to see how he can balance those words against the governor's opposition to giving minimum guarantees in funding to schools, as well as his decision not to make up tuition support that had been promised to school corporations.

Here are details on other bills I have been working on this session:

I co-authored House Bill 1593, which would add a space to Indiana's vehicle registration forms where individuals would have the opportunity to donate at least \$1 to the emergency management foundation defibrillator fund. All donations will go toward the purchase of defibrillators. The legislation was passed by the Indiana House and will now be sent to the Senate for consideration.

House Bill 1357, which I authored, offers a funding option for volunteer firefighter equipment. The legislation would add a space to the state's vehicle registration form where an optional monetary donation may be made to the fire services fund. All money collected would be used to purchase fire equipment for volunteer fire departments. The bill was passed by the Indiana House and will now be considered by the Senate.

I am co-authoring legislation (House Bill 1594) that would temporarily hold back controversial fire code regulations that apply to festival tents. Some of the controversial rules includes the requirement that tents or canopy booths have sides that are certified as flame-resistant, putting festivals and other social functions at risk for funding the events. The bill has been sent to the House Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security for consideration. If passed into law, the negotiated rules would go into effect before the 2006 festival season.

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